Conversation

An Introduction

Gary Metcalf, PhD

Bela H. Banathy (1919-2003)

- Born in Hungary: influenced by Scouting
- WWII: wounded in battle
- Family lived six years in a refugee camp in Austria
- 1951-1969: Faculty at US Military Language School, Monterrey, CA
- 1969-1989: Far West Labs (Education R&D)
- 1982: Began IFSR Conversations and founded Systems program at Saybrook University



Bela's books

- *The Systems Design of Education* (1991);
- *A Systems View of Education* (1992);
- *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World* (1996);
- *Guided Societal Design: A Systems View* (2000), and
- *Dialogue as a Means of Collective Communication* (2002)

In the course of the last couple of decades I have become increasingly convinced that even if people are to fully develop their potential, they cannot give direction to their lives, they cannot forge their destiny, they cannot take charge of their future -- unless they also develop competence in taking part directly and authentically in the design of their own life, the systems, organizations, and communities in which they live and work. This is what self-empowerment is about.

Bela H. Banathy

If you are not choosing the life that you live, then you're living a life that someone else chose.

Gary Metcalf

IFSR Fuschl Conversations

Seewinkel Hotel, Fuschl am See, Austria



In April 1982 a group of systems scholars gathered in a small hotel in an idyllic setting on the shores of the Fuschl Lake, near Salzburg, Austria. They came from three continents, representing nine countries and ten cultures...

The group spent four days discussing the potential contribution that the systems movement may make in order to:

- develop and bring into focus a systemic view of global issues, and
- promote education in systems thinking as a way to enhance the capturing of global perspectives and attaining global awareness and consciousness by all.

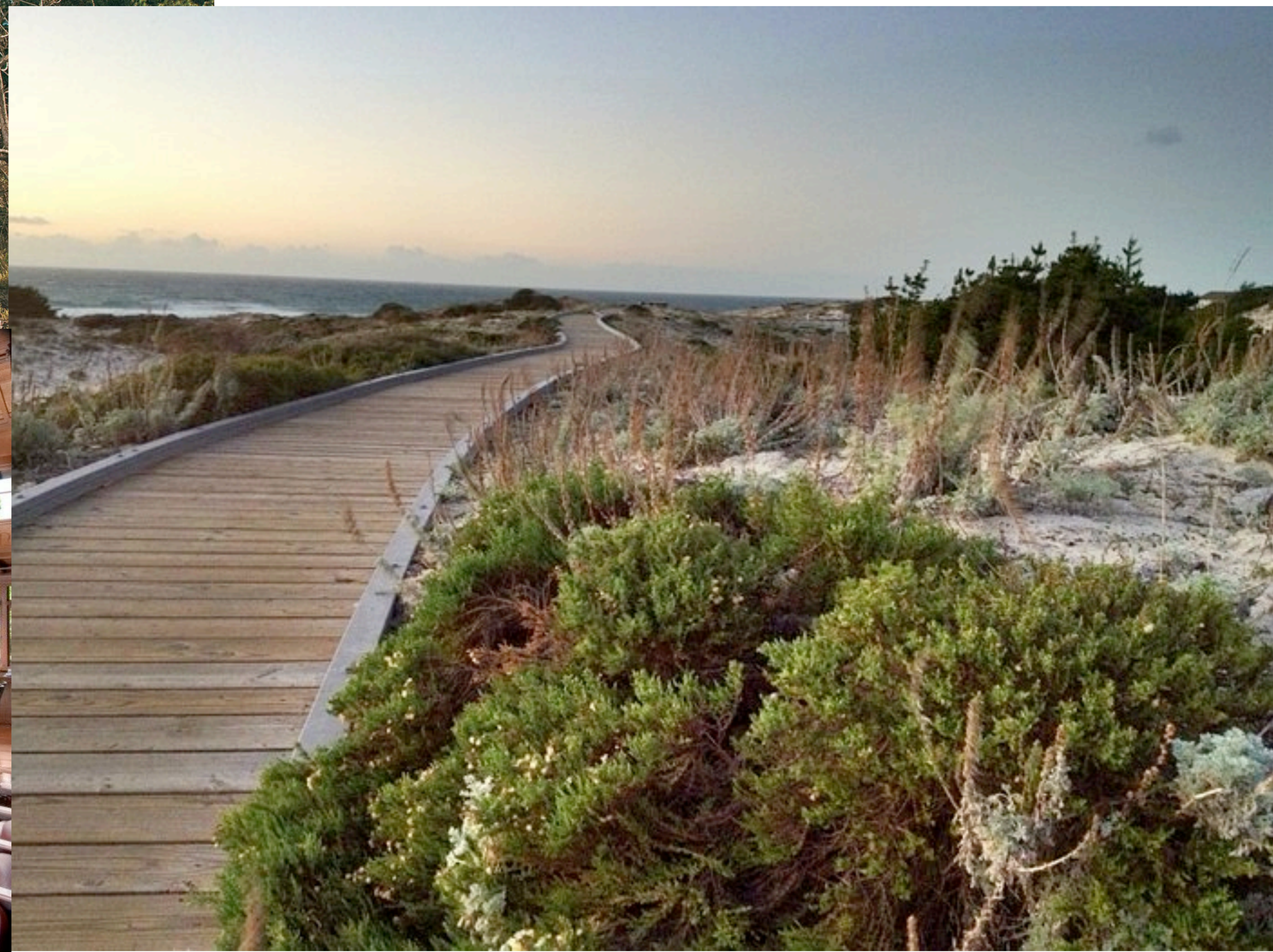
Since the symposium…the coordinating center of the program has been established at the International Institute for Systems Studies and Systems Education at the Far West Laboratory in San Francisco, California

International Systems Institute Conversations

Asilomar, Pacific Grove, CA







You may ask…what can a small group like ours do? We do not have – and never will have – the illusion of "grandeur"… We are guided by an evolutionary vision of the global unity of mankind and the full development of human potential everywhere… We are inspired by a shared dream for a better world for all. When our children and grandchildren ask us…"What kind of a world shall we inherit from you?", at least we can tell them that we will do everything within our power to leave them a more livable and peaceful world…

Social systems design is a process that carries a stream of shared meaning through a free flow of discourse among the stakeholders who seek to create a new system.

...the notion of “dialogue” has gained prominence as the most viable form of collective social discourse...

Design conversation combines two modes of dialogue [generative and strategic] and thus becomes the most appropriate mode of social discourse in design inquiry.

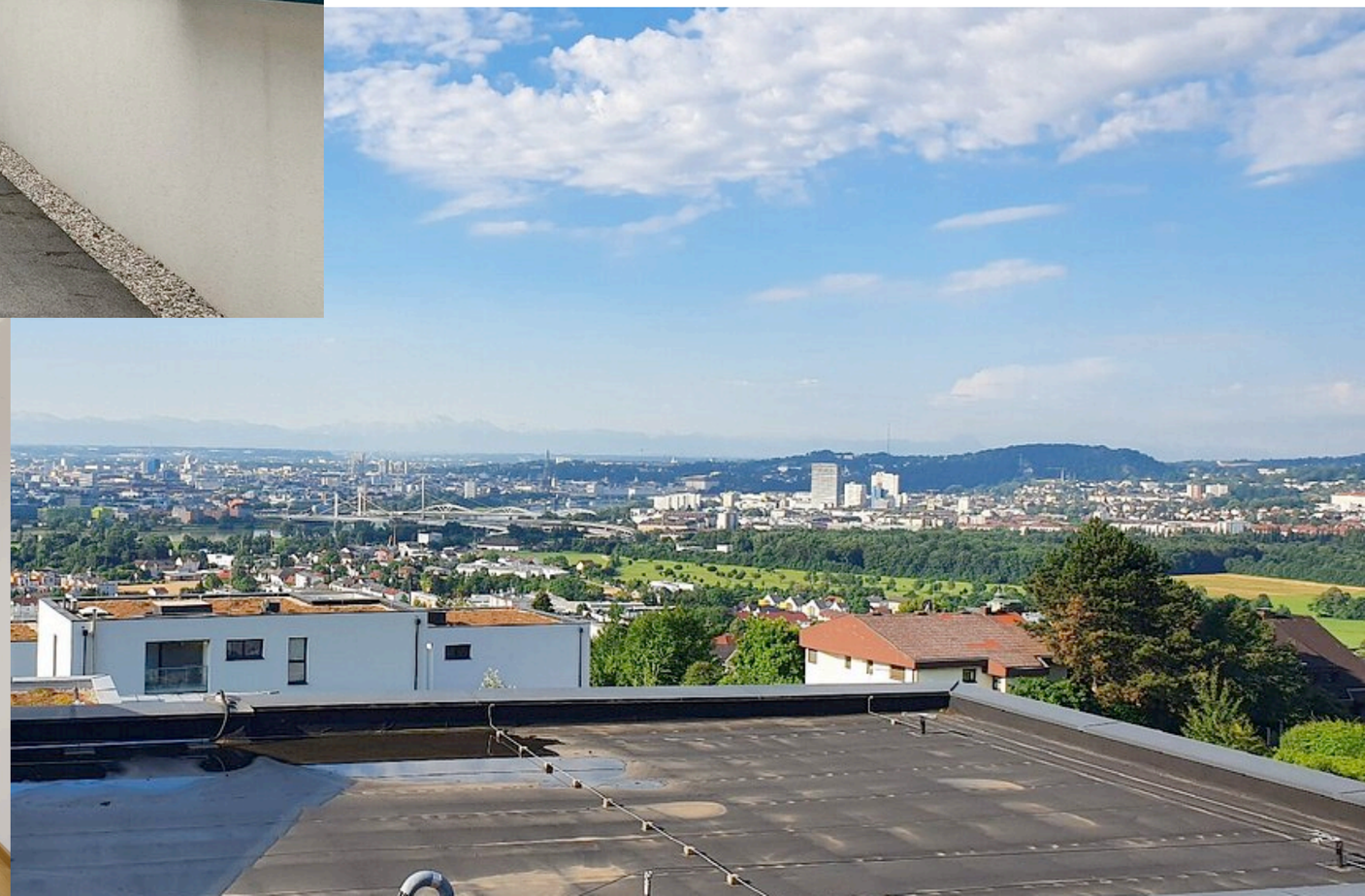
Bela Banathy, 1996



IFSR Conversations

Linz, Austria





Methods which are *not* Conversation

All useful, but different

- Brainstorming
- Strategic Planning
- World Cafe’
- Search Conference
- Team Syntegrity
- Conversation Theory (Pask)
- Strategic Democratic Dialogue

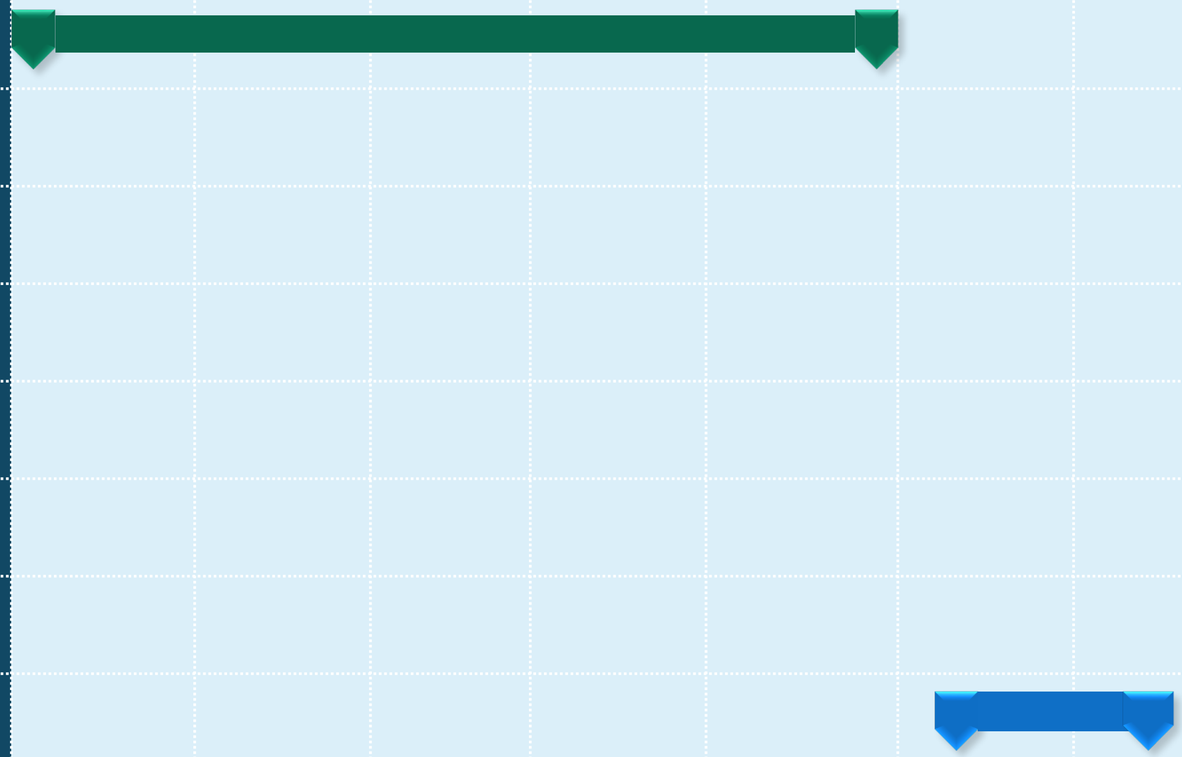
ISI Conversation Process

Tasks	Phase 1	
	March	April
Identify themes & topics		
Establish teams & leaders		
Send topics & readings to members		



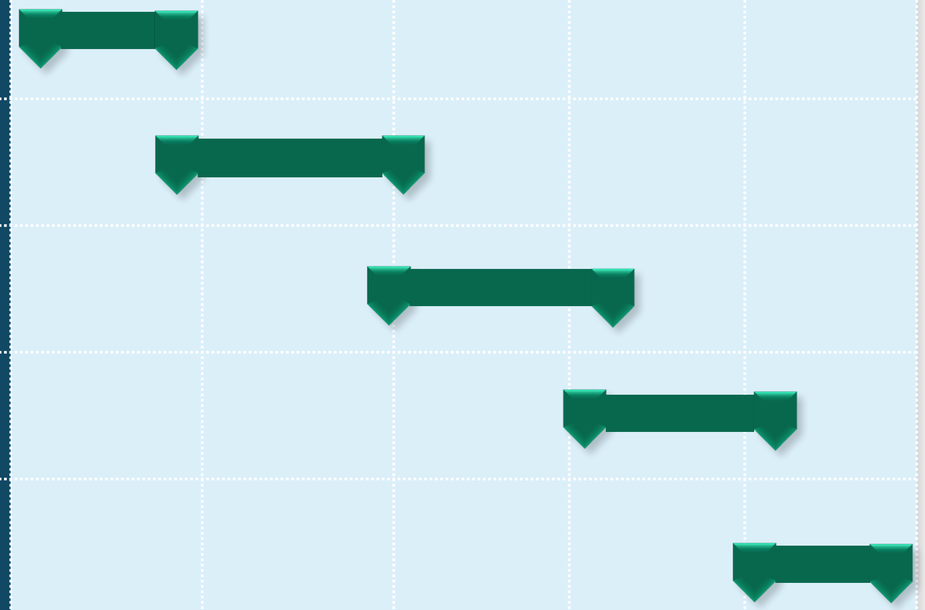
ISI Conversation Process

Tasks	Phase 2 – April to October						
	A	M	J	J	A	S	O
Participants explore topics							
Prepare “think papers”							
• Personal introductions							
• Personal interests and backgrounds							
• Research and core ideas							
• Expectations for learning							
Share “think papers”							
Set preliminary agenda for themes							



The Conversation

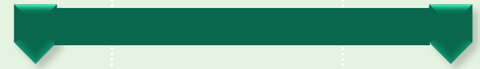
Tasks	Phase 3				
Days	1	2	3	4	5
Introductions and foundations					
Explorations and generative dialogue					
Convergence to strategic dialogue					
Preparation & presentation of findings					
Decisions and commitments for follow-up (proceedings, papers, future conversations)					



ISI Conversation Process

Tasks	Phase 4
	Nov · Dec · Jan · Feb · Mar
Summary reports	
• Learning and findings	
• Evaluation of the Conversation	
• Recommendations for next Conversation	
Individual scholarly papers for proceedings and journals	
Planning for next Conversation	







Why Conversation?

A chance for deep learning with other experts who care about the topic.

Practicing Dialogue:
The importance of being heard

A minute of reflection:

- Is this topic important?
- If so, why?
- Why does it matter to you, personally?

When was the last time that you truly felt heard by another person?